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COMMERCE FOR DAS FOR DOMESTIC OPERATIONS LITKENHAUS

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR DECEMBER 7-9 VISIT OF DEPUTY
SECRETARY OF STATE NEGROPONTE AND CONGRESSIONAL DELEGATION

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Summary

1. (SBU) Your return to Colombia comes as the Uribe Administration continues building a safer, economically stronger, better governed and more democratic country. Murder rates declined 40 percent since 2002, violence against union members fell over 60 percent, and kidnapping rates plummeted 76 percent. Increased security has led to an economic boom, registering 7.5 percent growth for the first semester of 2007, and poverty levels dropped 20 percent. More than 40,000 combatants, mostly paramilitaries, laid down their arms since 2002, and the Uribe Administration has focused aggressively on reducing human rights violations. The Government beefed up the judiciary, reformed the judicial process, and protected at risk union members, journalists and human rights workers. Venezuelan President Chavez' November decision to put relations with Colombia "in the freezer" and his ad hominem attacks on President Uribe have sharpened the importance of strong relations with the United States in the minds of most Colombians. The delay in U.S. ratification of the U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Act (CTPA) has raised concern about our commitment to Colombia. CTPA will likely create hundreds of thousands of jobs for citizens now vulnerable to terrorist or narco recruitment.

2. (U) On this trip your delegation will witness first hand those dramatic changes. In Medellin you will speak with demobilized persons and see the dramatic security and economic improvements that occurred in previously one of the most violent cities on earth. In Bogota you will meet with President Uribe to hear his positive vision for Colombia and U.S. relations in the region, as well as the continuing challenges posed by narcotrafficking and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). End Summary.

Positive Economic Outlook

3. (U) Significant gains in security have helped boost the Colombian economy, with GDP growth in 2007 near 7.5 percent. Both exports and imports grew more than 20 percent in 2006. The U.S. remains Colombia's largest trade partner (approximately 40 percent of exports and 26 percent of imports). Colombian exports to the U.S. have grown USD 1 billion per year since the Andean Trade Preferences Act's (ATPA) renewal and expansion in late 2002, while U.S. exports to Colombia increased approximately USD 2 billion. Total foreign direct investment in Colombia has quadrupled since 2002, reaching some USD 8 billion in 2007. The largest U.S.

investors - Drummond (coal), ChevronTexaco and ExxonMobil - plan considerable expansion due to the improved investment climate and security situation.

¶4. (SBU) The CTPA remains the Colombian government's highest economic priority, and Colombians remain bewildered over the U.S. delay in passage since Colombian consider themselves staunch U.S. allies in a complex region. The Colombian Congress ratified the CTPA in June by a substantial margin. Our Congress extended trade preferences for Colombian exporters under the ATPA through February 2008. The Uribe Administration has redoubled efforts to win U.S. Congressional support for CTPA, and hosted visits by President Bush, Defense Secretary Gates, Commerce Secretary Gutierrez, U.S. Trade Representative Schwab, Overseas Private Investment Cooperation CEO Mosbacher, and Senate Majority Leader Reid in 2007.

Democratic Security

¶5. (U) Increased security and the paramilitary demobilization has achieved tangible results. Colombians from all walks of life will tell you that for the first time in decades they can drive across the country without fear of kidnapping or vote in elections without intimidation from armed groups. Civil society and political parties operate more openly than ever before. In May 2006, the leftist Polo Democratico candidate for President received over 2.5 million votes, the highest level ever for a leftist candidate. Colombia's October 28 local elections occurred without significant violence or problems, according to the Organization of American States. More than 80,000 victims stepped forward in the new more secure Colombia to denounce paramilitary crimes, and Uribe and the Courts have aggressively pursued investigations against almost 50 members of the Colombian

Congress for alleged paramilitary ties.

Labor

¶6. (U) Violence against trade unionist has declined dramatically under Uribe, but impunity remains a major concern. Colombia developed excellent relations with the International Labor Organization (ILO), and in 2006 the ILO recognized Colombia's progress and removed it from discussion in the ILO's Committee for the Application of Standards for the first time in 21 years. A resident ILO representative arrived in Colombia in January 2007 to implement the agreement, which commits the government to finance the ILO Special Technical Cooperation program and allocate USD 1.5 million annually to the prosecute cases of violence against trade unionists. The GOC has assigned nearly 100 prosecutors and investigators to a special unit dedicated to this task in the Prosecutor's office. Labor leaders and the UN High Commission on Human Rights (UNHCHR) local representative praised the initiative.

¶7. (U) The Colombian government has taken several steps to protect labor leaders and prosecute those responsible for union violence. In 2006, the Colombian government protected 10,000 human rights activists and other individual at risk, including over 1,500 union members. The Colombian government plans to spend USD 35 million on protection in 2007. You will meet Prosecutor General Mario Iguaran who has reaffirmed to us that his office remains committed to prosecuting cases of violence against labor. Since 2001, the Colombian government has won convictions in 56 cases of violence against union members, resulting in sentences against 118 suspects.

U.S. Assistance

¶8. (SBU) In January, the Colombian government presented a Plan Colombia "consolidation strategy" pledging a Colombian investment of USD 78 billion between 2007 and 2013. The proposal contains a heightened emphasis on social development, assigning new resources to consolidate governance, human rights, displaced people, and Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities. It also aims to reintegrate 42,000 demobilized ex-combatants and deserters and to promote Colombia's competitiveness and licit exports. The Colombian government seeks funding from the United States and European countries, but also brings substantial resources of its own to the table. USG security assistance combats drug trafficking and terrorism and includes training, material aid, and technical assistance to security forces and other institutions. It also provides support for Colombian government aviation, essential for all programs-civilian or military-outside Colombia's major cities.

¶9. (U) Under Plan Colombia, the USG provided more than USD 600 million in economic and social assistance over the past seven years. In FY2007, the USAID Mission in Colombia funded USD 139 million of programs in four key strategic sectors: alternative development and economic policy reform; justice reform, human rights and strengthening governance; demobilization and reintegration of illegal armed groups; assistance to internally displaced persons (Colombia has between 2 and 3 million displaced persons), Afro-Colombians and other vulnerable populations. The USAID Mission has coordinated closely with other sections of the Embassy to strengthen the integration of security, counter-narcotics and economic assistance.

Drug Eradication and Interdiction

¶10. (SBU) Eradication of coca and poppy crops and interdiction of cocaine and heroin reached record levels in 2006, and political support for manual and aerial eradication continues to grow in Colombia. President Uribe understands that manual eradication cannot replace aerial eradication without a sharp increase in expenditures, and he seeks a complementary approach using both methods. The National Police and military forces seized over 203 metric tons of cocaine and coca base in 2006, a near-record quantity, and destroyed 200 cocaine laboratories, also a record. We continue to work with the Colombian government to refine our eradication strategy and determine how best to transfer key tasks from the USG to the Colombian government.

Military Justice and Improved Human Rights Record

¶11. (SBU) The Uribe Administration remains strongly committed to progress on human rights, and to eliminating military abuses or collaboration with armed groups. Members of the military and police receive mandatory human rights training. Minister of Defense Juan Manuel Santos has made military justice reform a top priority; in October, he named the first civilian - and the first woman - as director of the Military Criminal Justice System. Santos has also taken steps to eliminate extrajudicial killings by security forces. The UNHCHR and human rights groups all play active roles here.

Extradition

¶12. (SBU) President Uribe remains a strong supporter of the U.S.-Colombia extradition relationship. Since taking office, he has approved over 565 extraditions to the United States including 154 cases so far in 2007, a new record.

Demobilization and Peace Process

¶13. (SBU) Over 32,000 former paramilitaries have demobilized since 2002, and a further 11,000 have deserted other illegal armed groups (about one-half from the FARC). This has resulted in the largest reintegration program ever attempted and operates while the Colombian government continues to battle the FARC and National Liberation Army (ELN). A small number of renegade former-United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) members have joined new criminal groups focused on drug trafficking. The Colombian government has identified increased investment in small and medium enterprise development as a priority for promoting job creation for demobilized ex-combatants.

¶14. (SBU) The ELN has negotiated with the Colombian government for almost two years, but prospects for success remain doubtful. The ELN still uses kidnapping to finance its operations, but their military capability continues to decline. The FARC has refused to engage in any meaningful peace talks, and in June killed eleven state legislators that they had held hostage. At the end of August, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez offered his assistance in facilitating peace talks between the Colombian government and the FARC and ELN, and on November 6, Chavez met with FARC Secretariat member "Ivan Marquez" in Caracas. President Uribe ended the Chavez effort on November 21 citing a lack of results and Chavez' failure to adhere to rules of the game he had agreed to with GOC. Chavez reacted by freezing relations with Colombia, withdrawing his ambassador to Colombia, and launching a series of personal attacks on President Uribe--calling him a traitor and "pawn of the imperialist."

U.S. Hostages

¶15. (SBU) The three U.S. contractors captured by the FARC in February 2003 are the longest held U.S. hostages in the world. Their safe release remains our top priority. The Colombians provide full assistance, and President Uribe has assured us that he will include the U.S. hostages in any exchange. On November 29, GOC security services detained three suspected members of the FARC and discovered video, photos and letters for 16 FARC-held hostages, including the Americans--the first visual proof of life for the American hostages since 2003.
Nichols